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ABSTRACT

As more and more writing process oriented teachers must oversee, design, and execute classroom intervention studies, a discrepancy arises from the inappropriateness of the process style to the product orientation of research. In establishing experimental procedures, researchers try to account for all variables, but for process-oriented teachers, conducting research, this can result in additions, deletions, and changes throughout the study. With regard to writing evaluation, the process-oriented teacher's natural bent toward personal response often impedes a blind evaluation in the research. A final area of conflict relates to a process teacher's concern for individual performance rather than for group achievement. An alternative which avoids some of these problems can be found in ethnographic research. By observing children's natural behavior in the classroom, researchers can see the spontaneous act rather than the forced response and thus learn much from that store of information. Maintaining as nearly as possible a natural setting is an obvious yet elusive fundamental axiom. Situations wherein students are writing about writing, are then asked to think about their metawriting activity, and are furthermore asked to speak about this into a tape recorder seem to be a great distance from the natural act of writing. A second caution centers around the tendency of some of these studies to draw generalizations or conclusions unwarranted by this type of research. (HTH)

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# Classroom Experimentation and Good Teaching: Are They Compatible?

In recent decades, and especially since the Dartmouth Conference, English teachers have been learning the process style. For some it has been a difficult lesson. Grammar, traditionally seen as a final product, with only right and wrong student responses, has slowly come to be understood as a systematic description of a dynamic process of communication. Teaching writing, likewise, originally viewed as a stimulus-response enterprise, consisting merely of assignment of a topic and written response has emerged as a sophisticated and elongated sequence which includes pre-writing activities, revision techniques, peer editing and other stages in the total process. Both of these transformations clearly underscore the basic move in curriculum thinking: from mastery of fact to methodological competency, from knowing the names and dates of Whitman's poems to being able to handle their nuances with adroitness. Even agencies like ETS, charged with mass testing, have moved from product orientation to a concern for process skills.

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At the very time this transformation has occurred, the notion of research in one's own classroom or school has surfaced; large, sophisticated school systems, anxious to exploit that notion, have

transferred some of their most able practitioners to administrative responsibilities which often include, in these grant-laden institutions, the task of overseeing, and even designing and executing, intervention studies. Ironically and unfortunately, the very process style which these initiators have adopted so completely and masterfully is often counter-productive to their work as researchers.

Such a shock of recognition came to us as we participated in a writing project under the auspices of an urban school system. As Chief Evaluators of that project, we found ourselves in more than a few moments of mutual consternation over its design changes and procedural quirks. Because we knew and respected the intelligence of the persons coordinating the study, we did not attribute these problems to general professional incompetence. At the same time, the similar nature of the problems and their tenacity made us realize that they were not flukes but, rather, a pattern resulting from a systemic difference between teachers and researchers. The more deeply we thought about what we found, the more certain we were that the anomalies arose from the inappropriateness of the process style of highly capable teachers to the product orientation of research. Thus, we felt that an articulation of some of the more prominent contrasts between Process Teaching and Product Research might offer help to those striving to contribute to both:

| PRODUCT RESEARCH | PROCESS TEACHING |
|---|---|
| Static Preparation | Dynamic Innovations |
| Population Control | Additive Participation |
| Pre-Post Testing | Incremental Evaluation |
| Blind Scoring | Personal Response |
| Group Assessment | Individual Concern |

In designing research studies one of the most difficult matters to address involves projection and foresight. When researchers establish experimental procedures they try to account for everything that will transpire in the interim between initiating and concluding the study. At the very least, every item to be measured or evaluated needs to be embedded in the design procedures from the beginning. What we found, however, was that add-ins, changes, and deletions were all too common. The notion, for example, of piloting several writing topics to insure, as well as possible, that those selected were equally provocative, that they engendered similar intensity of response, was a foreign one. For innovative teachers, fastidious planning which attempts to rule out significant departures from pre-established methods seems stale and lifeless. Process teaching expects spontaneity; hence, proceeding in this more timid manner can be distasteful.

Population control may sound like the name of a new sex education course to process teachers, but it is, in fact, an integral facet of research design. For teachers daily confronted with the effects of mobility and family dissolution, students entering and leaving their classrooms are a matter of course. Little note is made of the sequence. Teachers have a built-in flexibility which allows for such shifts of faces. Yet, in a carefully controlled study, such additive participation skews the results in the most fundamental way. Cyril Burt's studies of twins have, for example, been almost wholly discredited because of the cavalier (or Machiavellian) manner in which he deleted certain parts of his population while adding others. In the project with which we were affiliated the population suffered similar alteration;

it was clearly due not to conscious obstruction or malfeasance, but to a natural operational style which was too deeply ingrained to be noticeable. Students, for example, who were a part of the pre-testing dropped out of the study before its completion, while others entered late and never had the full benefit of the intervention, though they were a part of the post-testing. Teachers took little note of these shifts.

Closely related to this phenomenon is the matter of the time-line for testing. Process teachers who downplay grading as the basic means of motivating students often turn to frequent assessment as a means of invigorating the entire learning process; they eschew the threat of a massive evaluation of some final product to prod students along. Such multiple evaluation lets success build on success and so has been increasingly used in the English classroom. Yet constant assessment over the entire range of the instructional time is in sharp contrast to the three-stage notion of base-line testing, pure intervention, and then final testing. The idea of adding a secondary assessment instrument in the midst of the intervention seemed a natural course of action to process teachers when such a measure was deemed helpful to a final assessment. Other external evaluators who worked in the project, however, found additive testing unacceptable.

With regard to evaluation, too, the process teacher's natural bent toward personal response often impeded the research. Teachers who know their students well, and the life-context out of which they step when they come to school tend to assess their students' work in light of the manifold exigencies of their daily lives. Students' potential, their effort, and their special circumstances

are often given serious place in the final evaluation of their work. Thus, it has not been uncommon to find that teachers engaged in empirical research would altogether lose sight of the need for blind evaluation in which the evaluator knows nothing about the participant and is thus immune from bias. In this project, some of this same personalizing mind set was present. They were reluctant to ignore whether a paper or set of papers were from the base line or post-intervention group, though of course, such knowledge could have had a strong effect on their expectations. We were left with the possibility that expectations of improvement might well have been the basis for significant change in performance.

A final area of conflict relates to a process teacher's concern for individual performance rather than for group achievement. In the writing project the teachers tended to be more interested in individual achievements than in statistically summarized performances of groups. Priority concern for a group's statistical progress or decline emerged only very slowly. The overriding interest in the work of individuals at times made it difficult to concentrate on the larger, more fundamental question of performance by groups. Though teachers do obviously size up their classes as wholes, the daily pressures, the structures for reporting individual grades and, most importantly, the process teacher's concern for the progress of individuals over time press them toward assessment tailored to individuals.

On the bright side, our experience suggests that the antithetical tendencies of researchers and process teachers need not subvert research design and valuable findings. Because process teachers are by

definition flexible and adaptable to new patterns, as well as open and innovative; they are receptive to the procedural differences between the two styles. When time is available, such adaptations come quickly and with ease, yet while the process of adaptation is taking place, the obverseness of the two worlds is most apparent. But if one had to choose, the ultimate benefits of a project,good teaching, process teaching, ought naturally be valued above quality research. Consciousness of the anomalies, however, might make the path to reformation a smoother one and the results of the research meritorious all the sooner.

An alternative which avoids some of the problems process teachers have developed in empirical research is found in ethnographic research. This increasingly popular approach is particularly appropriate to studying writing and has offered many new insights into this process. Such an approach veers away from a strict kind of experimentation in that it employs the social science or anthropological rather than the natural science model. This kind of ethnographic research has been used profitably by teachers in their own classroom and by outsiders who watch and carefully note students' "natural" behavior much as Jane Goodall observed a troop of chimps or Margaret Mead a tribe of aborigines. The power and effectiveness of such a methodology are, of course, self evident. Through it we are able to see the spontaneous act rather than the forced response and thus learn much from that store of information. If an observer carefully records these authentic language acts, then clearly something is to be learned from them. Sondra Perl, Ken Kantor, Lee Galda and other notable ethnographical researchers have already taught us much about writing that we would not have know by any other means.

Two cautions, however, are worth noting here. The first, maintaining as nearly as possible a natural setting, is an obvious, yet elusive fundamental axiom which sometimes escapes the ethnographic researcher. Situations wherein students are writing about writing, are then asked to think about their meta-writing activity, and are furthermore asked to speak about this into a tape recorder seem to be a great distance from the natural act of writing. Acknowledging the fact that any school activity is by definition contrived, teachers should nevertheless be able to approximate spontaneity far more nearly than has sometimes been the case. A second caution would center around the tendency of some of these studies to draw generalizations or conclusions unwarrented by this type of research. Studies which would be valuable in their own right tend to make claims and assume causal connections where none should really be attempted.

Both of these research paths have their peaks and their pitfalls and each offers us new understanding about language learning. But whatever the model, the fact that teachers are heavily engaged in research in their own classrooms suggests an even more important notion: that the epistemological urge to learn about learning is gaining ever greater strength in our profession.